

Euripides, trans. Robin Robertson
from *Medea*

lines 230–266

Medea:

[...]

Of all living, sentient creatures,
women are the most unfortunate.
We must save and save to raise a dowry;
then the man that agrees to marry us
becomes master of our bodies:
a second burden greater than the first.
Loss and insult: that is all we have.
Everything hangs on his character:
is the master good or bad?
We cannot refuse him anything, but if we divorce
we are seen as somehow soiled, as damaged goods.
Innocents and strangers, we enter our husbands' houses,
with all these new laws and customs to deal with;
we need to use our intuition to teach us
how best to please our man.
If we do well in all our duties, and don't let him
ever think he's imprisoned in the marriage,
everything's fine. If not, it's death in life.

When a man's bored of what he has at home
he goes elsewhere: finds someone else to amuse him.
The woman must wait, for she is allowed
to look at one face only: his.
Men tell us that we are lucky to live safe at home
while they take up their spears and go to war.
Well, that's a lie. I'd sooner stand behind a shield
three times in battle than give birth once.

But yours is a different story. This is your city.
Your fathers are here;
you have the pleasures of life,
the company of friends.
I am alone in Corinth, an outsider
in a strange city far from my family –
my only company a husband
who took me as plunder from some foreign campaign
and now dishonours me. I have no mother, no brother,
no kin to turn to, to shelter me from shame.
So I shall ask this one favour from you.
If I can think of any way, any plan,
to make my husband pay for all this hurt,
will you keep my secret?
A woman is too timid, too weak, they say, for war
– would faint at the sight of battle-steel –
but when she is injured in love,
when her bed has been defiled, she'll have your blood.

There are no manuscripts in the hand of Euripides or, indeed, any of the classical authors: the only complete transcriptions that survive are from the tenth century, and they are copies of copies. Over the centuries there have been ample opportunities for textual corruption, and texts of the play more academic than this one offer solutions of reconstruction 'by conjecture'. They also address the problem of interpolation, where new matter appears to have been added to expand or elaborate the original. I have used the Loeb Classical Library edition, edited and translated by David Kovacs, as my primary source, and have consulted a number of excellent English translations – primarily those by John Davie, Alistair Elliot, James Morwood and Philip Vellacott. My main concern has been to provide an English version that is as true to the Greek as it is to the way English is spoken now. *RR*